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Rage, Resistance and Transgression beyond Marginalised set up: Critiquing Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat"

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Abstract: Zora Neale Hurston's works were deeply influenced by social stereotypes which promote sexism and gender discrimination prevalent during her time. Hurston writes about the marginalized and oppressed in many of her works which are still being eulogized not only in Afro-American literary circles but all over the globe also. Delia's emotions, desires, ambitions and her right to live peacefully are systematically denied by her callous husband. Delia endured an unpleasant married life with Sykes and suffered emotional and physical abuse which was multifarious, taking in social, physical, psychological and sexual violence. The community members, while having a sympathetic attitude towards Delia, do nothing at their end to intervene directly or indirectly, which reflects the patriarchal reluctance of individuals and society. In this story, rage and resistance function as strategic, historically rooted and transformative forces. Through their rage, characters confront marginalization, pain and injustice whereas resistance enables them to conceptualize and forge new possibilities, often empowering them to transgress age-old conventions which subjugate and exploit the individuals. Delia's liberation is not only in the form of physical freedom but also encompassing a deep psychological and spiritual emancipation thereby enabling her to create a life unconstrained by men who aspired to subjugate her.

Keywords: Hurston, Delia, Sykes, Norms, Humanity, Marginalised, Victimisation.

Introduction: Zora Neale Hurston was one of the most renowned Afro-American writers, who always provided the insight into various social, psychological and emotional behaviours of human beings. Her works were deeply influenced by social stereotypes which promote sexism and gender discrimination prevalent during her time. Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, and was brought up in Florida, a place which witnessed social evils like widespread racism and sexism which later on shaped the themes of many of her celebrated works. She remained one of the central figures during the Harlem renaissance and wrote prominently about core issues pertaining to the badly affected black community in the United States while spontaneously expressing her African-American experiences. Hurston, who remained free spirited in her views, raised her voice against social and economic inequalities, once penned in her autobiography *How it feels to Be Coloured Me* that:

I do not belong to the sobbing School of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.... I have seen that the world is too strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world- I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife (Hurston 152).

Almost all traditional societies follow different norms for man and woman which are defined as “standards of conduct that are rewarded or punished. Stated otherwise, people receive physical or psychological rewards and punishments for their behaviour, which encourages or discourages them to conduct themselves in a similar way in the future” (Labovitz and Hagedorn 284). From the earlier times, there had always been a huge dearth of female writings due to lack of educational facilities to women. In *A Room of One's Own* a distinguished author rightly opines that “certainly there were women in the past with great passion and creativity that were barred from writing due to societal norms” (Woolf 47-48). Though women have progressed a lot in the field of writing but in case of black women especially Afro-American one does not perceive much progress in this field. Hurston stands as a moon among stars whose struggle and writings serve as a role model for the women and especially black women in the field of literature. Hurston while forging a new path writes about the marginalised and oppressed in many of her works which are still being eulogized not only in Afro-American literary circles but all over the globe also. Her works are imbued with her deep concerns about inequality and discrimination among human beings.

Main Text: “Sweat” a short story by Hurston was published in 1926; having a washerwoman named Delia Jones as a protagonist who earns her livelihood while cleaning laundry of the white people. The whole plot of the story revolves around Delia Jones and her husband Sykes, who does not do any work, and their unpleasant married life. This couple had been living together for fifteen years, and Delia alone had been doing the job of washing whereas her husband lent her no support. She lives a miserable life in a marginalized set up. She earns some money to meet the expenses of the house; even her lazy and floundering husband also depends on her for his expenses. Instead of giving cooperation he censures her for bringing soiled clothes of the white into his house. Sykes does not give respect to his wife who works hard to run the family; moreover, she is often subjected to abuse and humiliation by Sykes on regular intervals which deepen the physical and mental harassment of Delia. One day Delia squats sorting laundry according to their colour while “humming a song in a mournful key” (ACSS 110). Sykes’ absence with her horse and buckboard occupied a space in her mind. As she was engrossed in her thoughts “something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her” (ACSS 110). A surge of fear shot through Delia when she misidentified it as a snake, and it took her “a full minute before she could cry out or move” (ACSS 110).

Sykes knew well that Delia has a great fear of snake therefore, he deliberately tried to intimate her and torture her psychologically. Sykes derives fun out of this incident and slapped “his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth” (ACSS 111). But Delia while taking control of her nerves screams at Sykes for having done such a foolish prank on her and says “Gawd knows it's a sin” and that one day “Ah'm going tuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness” (ACSS 111) but, he was completely unmoved by these words, instead he callously opted to call her “one aggravating nigger woman!” (ACSS 111). He now picks up a whip and glares at her while kicking all of her clothes and tries to get a reaction from her while standing “in her way truculently” (ACSS 111).t But Delia instead of getting provoked made her mind to remain calm and ignore her husband. To her, feigned ignorance seemed to be the powerful defense to deal with a person like Sykes as she has no physical match with him. The irritated Sykes does not stop here as he criticizes

her for being a hypocritical Christian. He does not give her the due space to do her work and kicks the whitest pile of things subsequently leading to the escalation of argument between them. Sykes' threat of beating unleashes Delia's rage and with audacity she firmly responds back and tells:

Look heah, Sykes, you have gone too far. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been taking in washing for fifteen years, sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat! (ACSS 111).

When Sykes responds impolitely, Delia does not forget to remind him that her work of laundry has "filled yo' belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it" (ACSS 111) and in addition to this she is also paying for the house. Thereafter, she seizes an iron skillet as an act of defense. Delia's such defensive behaviour caught Sykes to surprise and "he did not strike her as he usually did" (ACSS 112). Delia demonstrates her resolve to stand up for her rights to stay in this home till her last breath and not to allow the other woman to come in this house and "pile up" on her "Sweat and blood" (ACSS 112).

Sykes often does not turn up at night, but Delia knows well about his whereabouts, where he spends his night, with whom he shares his emotions. But the emergence of new spirit in Delia makes her indifferent towards Sykes' romantic relationship with Bertha. At one night she remembers her past time when they were in love, but those happy moments did not last long. After the two months of their wedding her husband gave her the first brutal beating. She remembers how Sykes used to visit Orlando where he would waste all of his wages and return to his wife penniless. Most of the time, both fight with each other and there is no way of peaceful settlement. On two or three occasions Delia "attempted a timid friendliness" (ACSS 115) but on every occasion her attempt was repulsed by Sykes. She knows that if Sykes had not been with Bertha he would have been with another woman. Delia, unlike other women, thinks differently and she says loudly "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or other, Sykes, like everybody else, is going to reap his sowing" (ACSS 112). Here one witnesses the emergence of a new independent woman who openly defies the traditional patriarchal norms. No other woman of that time would dare to use such words against her husband. Next morning, when she confronts rude behaviour by Sykes, she does not move but displays a "triumphant indifference" (ACSS 112) to him.

Delia has been regarded as a hardworking, dedicated and reliable woman who goes around the town on every Saturday doing her work of collecting soiled clothes regardless of any weather. People talk about Delia's miserable and unhappy married life. One of the villagers Elijah Moseley comments that too much harassment will "runaway 'oman" (ACSS 113) further adding that her husband has "beat huh 'nough tuh kill three women, let 'lone change they looks" (ACSS 113). He shows his confoundedness at Sykes's affair with Bertha whom he calls a "big black greasy Mogul" and "an eight rock" (ACSS 113). Merchant, one of the villagers, tells that Sykes has always been crazy "bout fat women" whereas Delia is small and thin. Clarke, who speaks for the first time, narrates a brief account of women's marginalised status in a conventional and orthodox society:

There's plenty men dat takes a wife lak they do a joint uh sugarcane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when they gits it. But they squeeze an' grind an' wring tell they wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a can chew. Dey throws them away (ACSS 113).

Here Clarke seems to be the mouthpiece of Hurston who takes up the marginalised status of women and while comparing women with sugar cane exhibited the dilapidated condition of women in a society where they have no say but are left aside with a choice of being subjugated, exploited and confined themselves in an orthodox marginalised set up. For fifteen years, Delia endured Sykes'

abuses and beatings as a subservient wife. Her emotions, desires, ambitions and her right to live peacefully are systematically denied by her callous husband. The community members, while having a sympathetic attitude towards Delia, do nothing at their end to intervene directly or indirectly, which reflects the patriarchal reluctance of individuals and society.

Sykes who has a keen desire to replace Delia with Bertha once brings a rattlesnake in the home with an evil intent to kill Delia. When Delia sees the snake, she almost faints from terror and says “Thass de biggest snake Ah evah did see” (ACSS 113). She later on pleads with Sykes to take it away but Sykes, having evil design in his mind, responds that the snake will stay in this home until it dies. He not only refuses to do anything for her and but also belittles his wife while callously commenting it's “a nice snake” (ACSS 113). The poor Delia who is even afraid of little worms pleads before Sykes and says:

Sykes, Ah wants you tuh take that snake 'way fum heah. You done starved me an' Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringing' dat varmint heah (ACSS 116).

Such pleading before Sykes does not bear any result, and it escalates Sykes' physical and psychological abuse as he threatens her that if she keeps annoying him, he will continue the cycle of brutal beating. Having heard this, she takes a firm stand for herself and breaks through her psychological and physical fear. He tells her husband that he is free to have his relationship with Bertha, but she will not let her stay in my house. Her firm decision not to allow his mistress inside her house reinforces her value and her right to this home for which she paid after pouring her sweat into her work.

In this story, rage and resistance function as strategic, historically rooted and transformative forces. Through their rage, characters confront marginalization, pain and injustice whereas resistance enables them to conceptualize and forge new possibilities, often empowering them to transgress age-old conventions which subjugate and exploit the individuals. Hurston's works provide a clear picture of a black woman's realities and offer an effective blueprint for liberation. By challenging patriarchal social setups, the protagonist does more than just get independence and tries to reshape the power dynamics. During one of her heated arguments Delia once asserted that she “hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah userter love you” (ACSS 116). This incident dramatically shifts the balance of power within a family unit as one observes that Sykes who was dominant and powerful man turning into helpless and his wife who remained exploited and oppressed demonstrate decisive power by ignoring him.

Conclusion: Delia always remained meek with deep Christian faith in having been faithful to her husband and God. Delia endured an unpleasant married life with Sykes and suffered emotional and physical abuse which was multifarious, taking in social, physical, psychological and sexual violence. Sykes did not hesitate to put her life in danger when he brought a six-foot-long rattlesnake into their home in order to derive pleasure out of her fear and get rid of Delia. Through the story the author seems to suggest the theme of ‘Good versus Evil’ wherein ‘the good’ will always prevail bringing to the fore her deep Christian faith also. In the end Sykes gets what he truly deserves. His ironical death further strengthens her Christian faith as she watches how the death device which was used by Sykes to kill Delia ultimately turned on him. Delia decides not to interfere and resist Sykes when he enters the house. Quite contrary to it, she remained passive and sealed her lips about the whereabouts of the ‘Satan’ who is moving freely inside the house. Now, she feels the first stirrings of an unstoppable force within her- the will to be free from his control which can bring moments of profound liberation as the patriarchal system of society expects a

woman to be submissive and respectful to her husband in all conditions. At this point Delia does not resist openly but her passive approach towards her dying husband shatters the age-old stereotypes. Delia inaction seems to be a necessary act of resistance against gender-centric system which had hitherto exploited and dehumanized her. Her deep faith in Christianity lends her inner strength; and her firm belief that God will address Sykes' undoing empowered her to break free from established conventions. Her liberation is not only in the form of physical freedom but also encompassing a deep psychological and spiritual emancipation thereby enabling her to create a life unconstrained by men who aspired to subjugate her.

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